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Chapter

Perspective Chapter: Will the Traditional Teacher Education Models Stand the Pandemics and Cyclones?

Lazarus Obed Livingstone Banda and Jane Thokozani Banda

Abstract

The chapter portrays the impact of COVID-19 and tropical cyclones on scrambled teaching practice supervision in the Southern African Development Community countries. Focus group discussions with student-teachers and field supervisors revealed that the pandemic and the natural disasters highly hampered teaching practice supervision quality. Delayed commissioning of the exercise due to damaged infrastructure and minimal physical mobility between the college and the practice schools impacted the frequency and spacing of field visits. Neither of the players preferred the scrambled supervision model. The chapter emphasizes that face-to-face traditional teacher education methods cannot absolutely stand the taste of pandemics and tropical cyclones. Resilient higher education institutions and requisite structures are key to sustainable quality teacher education amidst cyclones and pandemics.

Keywords: higher education, COVID-19, teacher education, teaching practice, SADC, Malawi

1. Introduction

Around the world, there have been several problems with teacher education, including an inadequate allocation of human resources, particularly in developing nations. Most sub-Saharan African nations have modest GDPs, making it difficult to recruit top candidates for teacher school. The unintended and unplanned adoption of the Free Primary Education and Education for All aims had a harmful knock-on impact [1], flooding the public primary schools with learners. As a result, there was a significant shortage of good infrastructure and skilled labor [2] in many countries, such as Malawi [3]. The high school education subsystem was consequently substantially impacted by the primary school enrollment levels’ meteoric growth [4]. As a result, teacher education institutions (TEIs) were required to prepare an equivalently large number of secondary school teachers in the shortest amount of time possible using both traditional and open and distance learning methods [3], putting more emphasis on quantity than on high-quality teacher preparation [4], reducing the length and adversely impacting the mode of practicums.
2. Field experiences from scrambled teaching practice supervision

Several issues can cause institutions to scramble teaching practice supervision. Two of these factors are understaffing and program scheduling. For illustration purposes, let us visualize a possible situation in which a higher education institution uses three distinct zones where student-teachers are placed for their field practicum experiences. Suppose a zone has 20 schools, and each has 13 student-teachers against a team of only 30 teaching practice supervisors with specialized knowledge in various subject areas for students to learn from. In that case, it will be very challenging to map each student with their corresponding subject specialists for classroom observation unless the exercise was scheduled for the whole year.

Because of this, the school’s annual calendar must include a block of time dedicated to teaching practice during the academic year. For all of the students to be visited frequently enough, the team in charge of coordinating the teaching practice has no choice but to make compromises regarding the matching of the students’ and supervisors’ respective areas of expertise (in terms of frequency).

2.1 Trade-off in scrambled teacher education field professional practice supervision

Professionally, teaching practice is a crucial component of teacher education since it serves as the cornerstone of professional development [5, 6]. Depending on the level of education, such as preparing to be a primary or secondary school teacher, and the higher education institutional operational structure and regulatory framework in place, secondary school student-teachers may choose to focus on teaching either one or two teaching subjects [7].

Student-teachers worry about their supervisors’ quality [8, 9]. During teaching practice, they expect final coaching, advice, evaluation, and fair assessment [7]. Scholars in teacher education suggest that supervisors should have the relevant abilities, topic knowledge, and pedagogical understanding, as required by principles of teaching and assessment [10, 11] without depending just on theory, to scaffold student instructors and prepare them for classroom dynamics and learner variety [12], due to the discrepancy between theory and practice in the university and after graduation [13].

However, Zeichner asserts forcefully that several worldwide research institutions consider teacher education programs to be of low standing [14]. Likewise, teacher education is frequently trivialized [3]. Realities in the practicum hinder the professional growth of student-teachers [14]. In certain instances, faculty members supervise student-teachers during practicum regardless of the supervisors’ specialization or expertise. This kind of practicum supervision is known as the scrambled model. For instance, a Computer Studies instructor may assess French Grammar classes (with zero language knowledge). Without communication, how might such supervisors determine if a pupil is instructing the incorrect material or utilizing the incorrect method? How would the supervisor give real guidance and assistance before and after the lesson delivery to maximize the trainee’s potential? In this circumstance, how would the two have a fair pre- and post-conference?

2.2 Learner support

Teaching is a moral activity; therefore, those engaged in it must do it morally correctly [15, 16]. Learner support is essential for the quality of learning, retention,
and knowledge transfer if supervisors are to assist students in making connections between material and practice, rather than just recommending different classroom practices [17]. On the contrary, in many higher education institutions worldwide, not all faculty members have enough interest in teacher education literature, teaching practice supervision knowledge, abilities, and experience [9]. For instance, there is evidence that some student instructors are instructed by graduate students rather than academics [9]. Nonetheless, any faculty member observes, evaluates, and assesses teaching practice lessons without regard for the specializations of faculty and student-teachers [9]. The disparity affects the quality of feedback and the assistance student-teachers get [18]. Despite being specialists in one discipline, such supervisors lack vital TP supervision experience and expertise in other fields by involving them in supervision before successfully resolving their classroom practice strategies [9]. Teaching others to become teachers contrasts sharply with training them for a different purpose and demands special training in the relevant field [9].

Notwithstanding that, practicum remains an indispensable and inextricable component of professional teacher education [5, 19–21]. Despite a plethora of studies supporting the role of practicum in teacher education, alternative research has significantly criticized its impact mainly because of how it is usually carried out [22]. As many schools of professional practice pay less and less attention to helping students obtain experience, the teacher-final learner’s only hope is the supervisor [23]; the ethicality of the scrambled practicum model needs to be determined.

2.3 The impact of the pandemics and natural disasters on the scrambled teaching practice mode

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the global lag in developing education systems pandemic-resistant and adaptable to other issues of face-to-face higher education. Higher education in the Southern Africa Development Community Region has been persistently adversely impacted by socially regressive, economically unsustainable, and emotionally upsetting policies [24], storms, and devastating cyclones [24–27]. Since 2000, at least 30 cyclones have hit the SADC area, including Cyclone Eline in 2000, Cyclone Japhet in 2003, Cyclone Dineo in 2017, Cyclone Idai in 2019, Cyclone Chalane in 2020, Cyclone Eloise in 2021 [28], Cyclone Ana, Cyclone Batsirai, and Cyclone Ennati [26].

Subsequent displacement, loss of means of subsistence, and depletion of assets exacerbated the poverty levels of affected households, which continue to exacerbate in the larger community [29]. Many education institutions were temporarily closed due to the devastation of school infrastructure and road networks, making them unreachable by road, while others were closed for use as temporary shelters for the displaced masses [30, 31]. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the temporary closure of several secondary schools had a significant impact on field practicum programs. Second, the frequency of practicum supervision was drastically reduced [25] because of COVID-19 prevention and control measures associated with mobility and social separation.

2.4 Student-teachers’ experiences from the scrambled TP supervision

The tropical cyclones and COVID-19 had a significant impact on the timing of teaching practice supervision. Along with the lockdowns and travel restrictions put in place to control the pandemic, the rains also damaged practice school roofs and
washed away roadways, which delayed the start of practicum supervision. An inter-
view with student instructors revealed several challenges caused by the unpredictable
teaching environment in the SADC during COVID-19 and the days after catastrophic
tropical cyclones. According to an analysis of supervisors’ portfolios, specialists gave
student instructors more precise feedback than nonspecialists (positive or negative).
Nonspecialists often gave course observation tasks higher scores than specialists
did. Supervisors with more experience seemed to be more critical of employees’
performance.
All coordinators from the six TEIs that participated in this study acknowledged
that supervisors were not always assigned based on their area of expertise but rather
on the TP schedule’s convenience, the number of teacher-learners in a zone, and the
available human resources. According to coordinators, they first establish the overall
number of students in a zone, then, utilizing the human resources at their disposal,
they decide on the proper ratios. Although supervisors frequently choose where to
send the lecturers, they make an effort to provide a proportional number of lecturers
to each site depending on the total number of teacher-learners. Any supervisor on-site
may supervise any student-teacher according to the daily timetable.
All student-teachers acknowledged a severe shortcoming in this area when asked
how frequently the expert could watch over the students. They said that occasionally,
erotic visits worry them. A child may occasionally go the entire term without expert
observation, despite other children at the same school receiving more.
The design and implementation of school visiting schedules and the overall
effectiveness of supervision are influenced by financial resources, human resources,
transportation, school location, school timetables, and the school calendar, accord-
ing to teaching practice supervisors in Malawi. Some schools are dispersed across
the county’s interior, far from the main thoroughfare. A zone could only have two
vehicles but four different daily routes. Supervisors must make sure that every school
is visited within the allowed period. During the visit along the path, some students
would not attend classes, while several students might have concurrent lessons with
the same supervisor. As a result, several students will be absent. There are several
circumstances where students are never entirely under the supervision of experts.
The entrance of supervisors and student-teachers on the scene for supervision and
the start of class observation and evaluation, according to supervisors and student-
teachers, leaves inadequate time for them to start another session. Usually, they have
to rush to another school, attend back-to-back lesson observations with several stu-
dents at the same school, or join their supervisory team to accommodate the schedules
of other supervisors who are far from the current school, which prevents them from
having time for pre- and post-conferencing.
The initial visit after deployment is meant to be for general observation rather
than evaluation, allowing students to practice their teaching skills in a real-world
situation. This differs from institution to university and depends on other factors.
However, several student-teachers quickly saw that some students were given grades
on their first visit due to COVID-19’s constrained teaching practice observation time
and the delayed opening brought on by the aftermath of the sweeping cyclones.
Twelve participants concurred that not all supervisors were knowledgeable
about subject-specific procedures and content-specific disciplines when asked
about their overall view of the scrambled supervisory model during a focus group
session. They were not happy with academic supervision since it lacked the profes-
sional insight and advice they most urgently needed. When nonspecialists disagreed
with what they believed to be the proper instructional strategy, students were
disappointed. If student instructors brought up a legitimate issue with a nonspecialist, they worried about coming out as haughty—unfortunately, children who heard devastating remarks and received poor grades grieved in silence. The student-teachers’ overwhelming professional and practical underperformance was attributed to various stressful situations. The presence of a teacher whose emotional stability I am unsure about and who did not have time for a pre-conference to build rapport before the start of the classroom observations added to the tension. Since there was always a measurement component associated with the activity, it appeared that the supervisors were essentially fault-finders in a highly stressful setting typified by intense anxiety. Typically, the student-teachers had the impression that they were taking an exam from a strange examiner with weird test items. Prior to teaching practice, the only professors who led us in micro- and peer-teaching sessions were those who had already supervised us through coursework. When a stranger enters my classroom unexpectedly, I find it frightening. Exclaimed a delighted student-teacher.

However, if a nonspecialist notices inconsistencies between epistemic truths and instructional practices, the paradigm permits brazen student-teachers to cheat. Both students and supervisors agreed that this strategy enables students to blame others when a supervisor doubts a student's sincerity in their classroom behavior. In the end, grades are determined subjectively. In addition to being a curriculum review process where supervisors decide how to help students improve in areas where they have demonstrated weakness, teaching practice should aim to assess student-teachers and award a grade commensurate with their performance. Supervisors lamented that, on occasion, student-teachers would respond to questions by saying that what nonspecialists dislike is what specialist faculty had taught them in college.

Supervisors occasionally observed the same student twice a day due to the short observation period, which gave the student-teacher little opportunity to reflect on the observations and performance from the first inspection before the second. This flagrantly breaches the standards of fair assessment by depriving student-teachers of the chance for a spaced-out review. It significantly affected the test lag effect. The main objectives of teaching practice supervision were the evaluation and grading of student instructors for certification, with minimal focus on learner aid, lecturers' acquisition of new subjects and methodologies, or curriculum creation.

Students and supervisors have different ideas about the right amount of monitoring. Coordinators liked to meet with students on the same subject frequently. Students resented being often observed by nonspecialists because they were frightened by managers since they were given insufficient assistance.

Some pupils would have to wait a long time before they could watch due to scheduling concerns. I want to be observed as much as possible for feedback, not grading, bemoaned one student-teacher. Realizing that all of your colleagues have at least three supervisors, but you have one observation from a nonspecialist, is unsettling. You already feel as though you are struggling and require more supervision at this point. If you already have two supervisors, you pray that no one else will take the opposing side.

3. Conclusion

This chapter has emphatically demonstrated that traditional face-to-face teacher education methods cannot stand the taste of pandemics and tropical cyclones.
Resilient higher education institutions and requisite structures are key to sustainable quality teacher education amidst cyclones and pandemics.

The lack of a unified policy governing teaching practice is partially to blame for the inadequacy of learner assistance during teaching practice in higher education. The main goal of the activity would suffer more significant damage from nonspecialist monitoring than from professional observation. Some teaching practice supervisors would get into class observation without engaging in a pre-conference to better get to know the student-teacher and provide advanced guidance. Nevertheless, this can be when the kids require scaffolding [9]. Institutions must understand that producing teachers who can represent them intellectually and professionally through a standardized procedure is their most significant source of pride. Therefore, they must allocate enough funding for this equally crucial stage of teacher education far in advance of the exercise’s deadline to avoid negatively affecting the program’s quality. In order to provide the core business the attention it so richly deserves, proper resource mobilization, allocation, and appropriation must be an ongoing activity in institutions of higher learning. Although TP can provide input on implementing the curriculum, it must be kept in mind that TP supervision is the last opportunity for a student-teacher to get assistance from faculty members. If TP is a way for college lecturers to hone their instructional techniques, then such TP sessions cannot be graded in a way that affects the student’s award.

Developing nations must devote more funds to education and ensure that they are invested wisely and for specific purposes. It might be worthwhile to try out virtual classroom observation now that COVID-19 is available. As a result of the supervisors not serving as carrier agents and going from school to school, the likelihood of transmissions will be reduced. As groups of supervisors collaborate on each observation, it will help improve the standardization of observation and comments.

Faculty should be committed and compassionate experts who can mentor, scaffold, and give authoritative subject knowledge assistance [9, 14]. For high-quality teacher education, their practical supervision functions are essential [32]. Before monitoring student-teachers in the final school-based TP, new and inexperienced faculty members should be well assimilated and participate in clinical supervision for fairness and efficiency. In all areas of supervision, only professionals should oversee adequate feedback. Pre-conference direction and post-conference feedback are crucial for effective learner support [8, 33]. As they interact with their students regularly, higher education institutions should create a conducive climate for academic success. To control and synchronize practice, a formal national policy that is well articulated must be created.
Author details

Lazarus Obed Livingstone Banda* and Jane Thokozani Banda

1 Ministry of Education, Nalikule College of Education, Lilongwe, Malawi

2 Ministry of Education, Directorate of Higher Education, Lilongwe, Malawi

*Address all correspondence to: lazaruslivingstonebanda@gmail.com
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